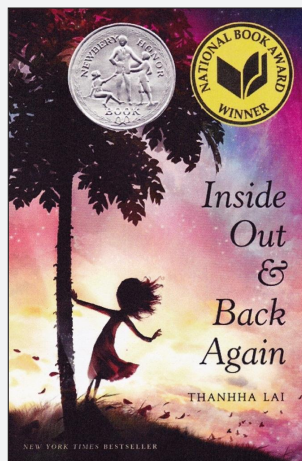


Second Reaction: Not the Same, But Not Bad At All

Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out & Back Again*. New York: Harper, 2011.

Kaye P. McKee



Inside Out & Back Again, by Thanhha Lai, chronicles the life of ten-year-old Hà from her celebration of Tết (the Vietnamese New Year) in 1975 until the 1976 Tết celebration. That historic year witnessed the departure of American troops from Vietnam and the advancement of North Vietnam's communist soldiers into the south. Hà's family, unable to await their MIA father's return, fled South Vietnam by boat and started a new life in Alabama. Much of Hà's story mirrors the experiences of its author, who fled Vietnam in 1975 and also settled in Alabama.

Written in accessible narrative poetry, the book takes its readers into the guts of Hà's experience: from spunky girl, to fearful refugee, to angry victim of racial prejudice, and, finally, into an immigrant timidly leaning into her new life. The book makes full use of its poetic elements, employing metaphors like "peacock tails at the corners of his eyes" (Lai 12) to describe laugh lines and "fish eyes" (Lai 8) to depict papaya seeds. The choice of poetry to relate Hà's story is, itself, a metaphor, because its unusual format invites the reader to, in Lai's words, set something new on his/her literary palate and, perhaps decide: "Not the same,/but not bad/at all" (Lai 233).

We shared *Inside Out & Back Again* at our nonprofit's Young Writers Club, a program that helps third through eighth graders translate their imaginations into print. Prior to our *Inside Out* meeting, I divided Lai's book into three sections by theme. The first section summarized the book's plot; the second described Hà's affinity for her papaya tree and its fruit; and the third explored her struggles with the English language.

I read the first set of poems aloud. When we reached the poems describing the effects of civil war, students plunged into questions. They wondered what caused the war, who fought whom, and on what side the United States battled. Most assumed that their country fought on the “right” side, which prompted a discussion about the events leading up to the war, about the nature of communism and democracy, and about the importance of viewing historical events through differing perspectives.

After reading the first section, I explained that the book was written as poetry. Club members expressed surprise, stating that it “sounded like a story” to them. The text read like prose to their ears because Lai’s poetry has such a strong narrative voice (the poems are written as complete sentences divided into lines). Also, our club members were accustomed to accessing chapter-length stories as prose.

A volunteer club member then read the papaya poems. Lai employs the deserted papaya tree and its fruit as metaphors for Hà’s loss, anger, and adjustment: nothing Hà experiences in Alabama “tastes” as good as what she left behind. We sampled papaya as we read Lai’s book, seeing for ourselves its light-bulb shape and scooping out the fish-eye seeds. Our students reacted to papaya much as Hà reacted to unfamiliar American food: the fruit felt and tasted strange on their palates.

A second volunteer read the last set of poems; these elicited raucous responses from our members. Giggles and guffaws sounded around the room at Hà’s sarcasm. Because, to Hà’s ears, the English “s” sounded like a snake, poem after poem played with the snake theme, each poem building on the sarcasm of its predecessor. As we began the fourth poem, one club member said, “Let me guess, ‘whoever invented English should be eaten by a snake.’”

In addition to enjoying Hà’s dark humor, our club members related to her frustration, because many struggle academically. Two-thirds of our students have reading and writing challenges that leave them, like Hà, doubting their intelligence.

After the reading, we offered three writing prompts based on *Inside Out*’s themes and writing style. One club member crafted a poem to calculus, another wrote an ode to broccoli (he is not a fan), and another imagined his trip to Sweden. After doing a bit of writing, one club member picked up *Inside Out*, flopped down on a sofa, and read until our time was up.

Student Reactions

The often-expressed viewpoint that stories written by women or about girls hold no interest for boys did not hold true in our small community. The boys in the club listened, wide-eyed, to Hà’s adventures and even nodded support when Hà defied her male-preferred culture.

In addition, Hà's forceful and negative feelings did not trouble our group. One poem literally shouts Hà's rage: "***I hate everyone!!!!***" (Lai 209-211). When I first read the phrase aloud, several students jumped. By the second reading, they listened attentively, eager to see how Hà's anger played itself out. My raised voice shocked them; Hà's words and feelings did not. They could relate.

For me, the most profound moment in the meeting followed a poem in which Hà discovers her tutor's soldier son had been killed in the Vietnam conflict. Hà wonders if her tutor hates her. A student asked, "Why would she hate Hà? Weren't we fighting the North Vietnamese? Hà's from the South, right?"

"Might the tutor's son have lived if he had not gone to help the people of South Vietnam?" I asked.

"Oh," said the boy, still puzzling it out. "Yeah. I see."

The notion that an American mother would blame a young girl because the girl's nation received aid from her son made no sense to him. It was one of those teaching moments that allowed me a glimpse into a student's soul and made me the grateful learner.

Inside Out became our club's immigrant ship. We climbed between its pages and traveled across seas and years to a region and a season our students had never visited, even in their imaginations. As we read, students leaned forward, taking in the poetry, drinking in the story of a girl who was both like and unlike them. They traveled with Hà, feeling her fear, her frustration, and her fury.

Of course, *Inside Out* is a great multicultural read. Of course, it is historical fiction written from the viewpoint of the vanquished. *Inside Out* is also literary magic: its story, powered by poetry, worked a spell on our young writers. They were puzzled. They were moved. They were awed. They left our session as different people: as deeper people. You can't ask more from a literary work than that.

About the Author

Kaye P. McKee has been writing and publishing books and children's educational curriculum for over thirty years and she's been teaching children for forty years. Kaye founded and serves as Executive Director for *A Spacious Place, Inc.*, a nonprofit corporation that serves the creative and spiritual needs of marginalized populations.